

Film | BY KEN MACQUEEN

MACLEAN'S

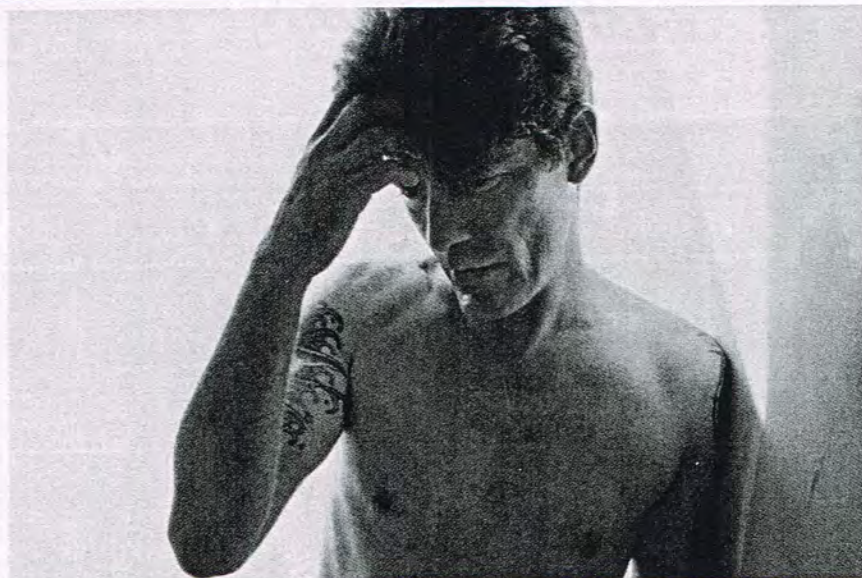
NEEDLES, LOVE AND REVOLUTION

How a documentary about Vancouver's drug plague altered a civic election

IT'S AN EASY 10-minute walk from the Cineplex Odeon theatres on Granville Street in Vancouver to the worst of the city's drug-addled Downtown Eastside. No, scratch that, it's not easy at all. It's an awful walk, past crackheads and junkies scamming, dealing and selling themselves for more of the drugs that kill them, or leave them vulnerable to disease and human predation. For tourists who make a wrong turn, it's like stumbling into a vision of hell. Most Vancouverites—and federal legislators for that matter—have simply avoided the area as they would a plague zone. That changed this fall, in one of the most remarkable municipal election campaigns in memory. The Downtown Eastside is the defining issue leading to the Nov. 16 vote. "It's Canada's first drug election," says documentary filmmaker Nettie Wild, the woman who helped set the agenda.

Wild is co-producer and director of *Fix: The Story of An Addicted City*. She travelled to Ottawa last week to screen the film before parliamentarians and key staff, hoping to "turn up the heat" on the tepid federal commitment to a national drug strategy. The issue is at full boil in Vancouver, due in part to *Fix*, and to public revulsion at the scores of drug-addicted women who've been murdered or gone missing from the neighbourhood. Wild's unblinking and beautifully rendered portrait of the carnage of injection drug use has been one of the top-grossing movies at the Granville 7 Cinemas for almost a month. It seems an unlikely success. Why pay, when the real thing is just blocks away? But *Fix* is an unlikely story, surprising no one more than Wild and her co-producer, Betsy Carson.

It began, Wild says, as a documentary about a quest by the Vancouver Area Network of Drug Users, VANDU, to open safe injection sites staffed by health professionals. It evolved into a love story. Two love stories, really, and a revolution. *Fix* is the tale of two mismatched outsiders: Dean Wilson, a tattooed, heroin-addicted ex-IBM salesman and president of VANDU, and Ann Livingston, a non-drug-using, church-going advocate for the organization. She



Fix traces the relationship of addict Wilson and a Christian who eschews drugs

attacks her role with missionary zeal, part of her Christian duty to "stand in the most uncomfortable place." The foil in this political set-piece was to be Mayor Philip Owen, the ultimate insider—a man of wealth, conservative values and bumbling good cheer.

Yet, over two years of filming, Wild realized she was capturing a tempestuous love affair between Livingston and Wilson, and the conversion of Owen from agent of the status quo to hero of the downtrodden. He championed at huge political cost his Four Pillar Approach as a "holistic and compassionate" response to the city's intractable drug problems. The first three pillars—prevention, treatment and enforcement—seem obvious. The controversy comes from pillar four: harm reduction, including the hereti-

At huge political cost, Mayor Philip Owen has adopted a 'holistic, compassionate' response to the problem of addiction

cal notions of providing heroin and safe injection sites for addicts. Wild has filmed revolution before in Mexico and the Philippines; she came to realize she was a witnessing one at home.

True to form, this revolution devours its children. The film records Wilson's continuing battle with heroin, to the anguish of Livingston. As for Owen, 69, he told *Maclean's* last week that his drug strategy cost him the support of his party, the conservative, pro-business Non-Partisan Association, and any chance for another term. Yet, in a perverse twist, the outcry over his ouster forced every serious mayoral candidate to pledge fealty to Owen's strategy. "Isn't that interesting?" he asks with a sardonic laugh.

Now unlikely partners Wild and Owen want a Canada-wide audience for *Fix* (which received major funding from Rogers Media Inc., which owns *Maclean's*). A shortened version will be broadcast on CTV next year. Owen, through his political connections, has helped raise \$100,000 toward a national cinematic release. He tells of a family friend, a 21-year-old woman who died this July after an overdose in the Downtown Eastside. This is a national tragedy, he says. His message to Ottawa is that it can't be ignored, as it was in Vancouver for far too long. **M**

Downtown Eastside documentary a must-see for Vancouverites

FIX: THE STORY OF AN ADDICTED CITY

A documentary by Nettie Wild

★★★½

By KATHERINE MONK

Because Nettie Wild's latest documentary bears witness to the "genocide" in our backyard — the Downtown Eastside — it's pretty much must-see viewing for any Vancouverite, regardless of which side of the harm-reduction fence you happen to sit on.

That's because Wild does make an attempt to get all sides of the story, from her intimate portrait of drug-user and community activist Dean Wilson, to her far more removed reportage on the land owners and lease holders on the Downtown Eastside who are desperately opposed to harm-reduction and its real-world translation: the establishment of safe injection sites.

These fears and frustrations are not news. Any Vancouver resident who has made a visit to Army & Navy in the past few years knows what it's all about. We've seen people shoot up. We've seen discarded needles in city ball parks.

It's hard to care when you feel powerless. As a result, Wild's biggest challenge as a film-maker is to get past that yellowed layer of blisters and callouses, and make us feel something about people we've been trained — as a society, as a culture, and for a long time, as a city — to see as disposable.

We no longer feel safe walking the streets at night. We can't leave our cars in underground parkades, and insurance costs continue to rise.

No wonder we hate those nasty, evil, weak, spineless drug-users, right? They hustle anyone, and everyone, just to get their next fix. They are selfish. They are dependent. They are also our friends, our children and the kids next door.

We are in this together and that's the angle Wild is eager to pursue through the course of the film as she attempts to broach the distance between the two extremes through two odd-balls: Mayor Philip Owen, who was pushed out of office by his party for trying to heal the festering sore, and Ann Livingston, a Major Barbara type who has tackled the issue with the same commitment and faith Jesus showed with lepers.

These two are our entry points to the mess, because they seem rational and not addicted. We can identify with them a whole lot easier than we can a fully tattooed user who sticks a needle in his arm at regular intervals throughout the film. We learn Wilson was at one time an IBM salesman in his straight life, but that hardly helps his cause.

When Wild increases the scope by showing us the landscape of the Downtown Eastside — in large part thanks to the unflagging efforts of the B.C. Nurses



Dean Wilson (left) and Vancouver Mayor Philip Owen are shown in the documentary *Fix: An Addicted City*.

Union, who also donated \$35,000 to the effort — the feeling of immediate horror of needles, blood, bruises and cockroach infested hotels ebbs, and we begin to see an entire community of people sidelined by the mainstream.

Finding the human level is crucial to the success of the film, and Wild scrapes away enough of the stale rhetoric to find the thread pulse.

When Livingston and Wilson form a romantic connection, the movie climbs to a different level as it exposes a whole different layer of human need. Wilson needs drugs. Livingston needs a larger purpose. The mayor needs a healthy city. Wild needs dramatic content.

As a result, the movie is something of a symbiotic parasite, each element feeding off the other, enabling its addictions, feeding its egos, but fortunately, raising awareness of the cause.

With the exception of Owen, hardly anyone feels truly sincere. Angry, yes. Frustrated, yes. Screwed up, you bet. But sincere, only in passing and that's a bit of a liability to the film, because Wild's camera does not push the issue.

She gives the broken people a break. It's understandable, and compassionate, but it hurts the film's integrity because I felt — whether warranted or not — she was pulling punches out of sympathy.

The other snag is the lack of "character development" when it comes to the mayor, and other featured personalities. There is no pivotal scene of enlightenment, and as a result, the dramatic trajectory of the film is pretty shallow.

Wild knows all these things, and most likely, did her best to get the nittiest, and grittiest. But there's a layer of denial she never cracks and, as a result, the film has a proselytizing edge that wasn't needed.

Perhaps Wild's biggest success is showing how even the simplest ideas become complicated once politicized.

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At Granville.

Addicted City should be required viewing

By Glen Schaefer
Movie Critic

Look at the documentary *Fix: Diary of an Addicted City* and then do the morning commute through Vancouver's Downtown Eastside.

Then watch the movie again — it should be required viewing for anyone who thinks they

know this city. Vancouver director Nettie Wild, who has made a career of documenting war zones from Chiapas to the Philippines, found the frontlines of the so-called war on drugs right here at home.

Part political drama, part protest document, part love story, the resulting movie is as contradictory and disturbing as the urban reality it depicts. Pick your message: intravenous drugs are nasty, ugly and they kill (they are and they do), criminalizing drug users doesn't work (one cop refers to policing the Eastside as "shovelling water"), tax-paying residents and businesspeople will rise as one shrill mass at any move towards "harm reduction" (i.e. giving users someplace other than a piss-soaked alley to shoot up).

Wild's film manages to avoid facile rhetoric — she fashions a narrative with complex characters, tension, success and heartbreak.

Vancouver Mayor Philip Owen and his thwarted bid for a harm reduction program are central to the story. Owen shows a surprisingly streetwise take on the problem, leavened with flashes of naiveté. At one point he tells of an Eastside activist's successful battle with addiction, only to be told the man is still a user.

That would be Dean Wilson, the other central player. Sometimes charming, sometimes manipulative, the tattooed ex-jailbird is the Downtown Eastside's hope and bane in one person.

The movie's big question: Given that people are dying from habits they can't shake, is it worth trying to make them healthy and safe? Getting to know some of Wild's hard-luck subjects, one reaction is that I wouldn't want to have them over for dinner. On the other hand, I'd say the same about, say, some federal Liberals — but I wouldn't want to see them dying on the streets, either.

Review

Fix: Diary of an Addicted City

Rating: ★★★★★ (out of four)

Warning: Subject to classification.

Playing at: Granville

THE GLOBE AND MAIL

R4 • REVIEW

THE GLOBE AND MAIL
WEDNESDAY, OCTOBER 2, 2002

The mayor, the addict and the filmmaker



There's a revolution brewing in Vancouver and it's the subject of a controversial documentary, **ALEXANDRA GILL** reports

Fix: *The Story of an Addicted City* attracted a sold-out crowd to its hometown premiere at the Vancouver International Film Festival on Sunday night. And if the euphoric reception was any indication, *Fix* is more than just a documentary — it's the first snapshot of a movement that's about to smack Vancouver into radical change.

Directed by Nettie Wild (*A Place Called Chiapas*), *Fix* tells the story of Dean Wilson, a former IBM salesman and heroin addict, who leads the fight to open North America's first safe-injection site for intravenous drug users. Wilson



A scene from *Fix: The Story of an Addicted City*, which features Vancouver's Downtown Eastside.

premiere last month at the Toronto International Film Festival.)

"We have to get this film out across the country and into every high school in Canada," said Owen.

In lieu of the customary farewell dinner, Owen has asked his supporters to buy tickets to a fund-raiser on Oct. 16 in aid of getting theatrical distribution for the film.

Tickets to the screening are \$100 each.

"When I first began this project, I thought it would be a short film that would take about four months and would cover the opening of Vancouver's first safe-injection site for drug users," explained Wild. "That was two years ago."

Instead, Wild found herself in the midst of a documentary-making

who had been brought in from a campsite outside the occupied Woodward's building in the Downtown Eastside.

It appears that this revolution has only just begun. After the screening, Wilson told the audience that Vancouver's Harm Reduction Action Society is planning to open the city's first renegade safe-injection site on Oct. 17, the day after Owen's fundraiser.

"If you look at every place where safe-injection sites have been established [27 countries around the world], they have all required actions of civil disobedience," said Livingston, a social worker.

Owen later said he was "not aware of the opening on Oct. 17 and would have to see how this safe-injection site would be supervised before he lends his support. "But I can understand their frustration," he added.

Let the revolution begin.

♦ ♦ ♦

er's dream — an ongoing social movement and a mayoral campaign that is quickly heating up (now that former coroner Larry "Da Vinci" Campbell has set his sights on the job) into what may be Canada's first election focused on drugs.

"Dare I call it a revolution," Wild asked the cheering crowd, which included a busload of squatters

Very human trio at heart of chronic drug storm

Fix documents
Vancouver crisis

Toronto screenings
followed by discussion

Fix: The Story
Of An Addicted City

★ ★ ★ ★
Documentary directed by Nettie Wild.
At the Carlton. 14A

GEOFF PEVERE
MOVIE CRITIC

While puncturing assumptions is a particular strength of documentary, rarely does it come with the dramatic fascination of Nettie Wild's *Fix: The Story Of An Addicted City*.

On the surface a movie about Vancouver's struggle to solve the problem of epidemic heroin addiction in its notorious Downtown Eastside, it becomes something entirely more compelling because of its focus on three people who flatly refuse to conform to prevailing expectations.

In the context of a movie about looking at old issues through new lenses, these people become the personal face of what's politically possible.

Dean Wilson is the first of these walking contradictions. A 49-year-old former IBM computer salesman with a three-decade junk habit, the tattoo-splashed founder of the Vancouver Area Network of Drug Users (VANDU) is both an actively struggling junkie — in Wild's film, he is the embodiment of what one person refers to as a "chronic relapse" case — and a passionate activist.

When we first meet Dean, the articulate, big-haired former corporate hustler is about to lead a group of drug-using protesters into a meeting at City Hall.

Hoisting a coffin to symbolize the soaring incidence of drug-related deaths in the Downtown Eastside, Dean's supporters are right behind him as he makes his pitch for a new strategy.

If they were annoyed at nearly missing the meeting because Dean had to stop for his methadone, they don't show it. But they probably understand.

Facing Dean from the other side of council chamber is dapper mayor (now former mayor) Philip Owen.

A cheerful man of obviously conserva-

tive inclination — at one point, he proudly pulls the tarp off his vintage yellow Mercedes — Owen seems as likely a supporter of Dean's pleas for a radical new civic drug strategy as Dean himself would seem a likely spokesperson for grassroots political reform.

But he is. Taken with Dean's suggestion that the so-called "war on drugs" is a costly and pointless bust, the mayor starts investigating matters both locally and globally.

Dressed in his Eddie Bauer west-coast dampwear, Owen cuts a sympathetically absurd figure as he keenly chats up strung-out users near the junkie epicentre of Main and Hastings Sts.

After travelling to European cities where city-run safe injection centres have proven effective in reducing drug-related deaths and HIV transmission, Owen begins drafting a four-point proposal for dealing with the drug crisis that culminates in something called "harm reduction."

It's this final point, endorsing the consideration of safe injection sites in the Downtown Eastside, that proves the most explosive.

Not only does it ignite the ire of businesspeople, politicians and community leaders who see safe injection sites as a form of endorsing addiction, it eventually leads to Owen's political downfall.

After Wild finished the film in 2002, the mayor was ousted by his conservative political party for his dangerously progressive views.

The third person in this unlikely alliance is Ann Livingston.

A non-using, seemingly fearless single mother of strong Christian convictions who uses her own money to open a users' haven from the syringe-strewn streets, Livingston also harbours a fascinating fondness for co-activist Wilson.

He appears in her apartment frequently during the film, and she has obviously nurtured a kind of non-nonsense tolerance for the man's relapse-prone lifestyle.

(Preparing dinner one night after she's learned he's using again, Livingston teases Wilson into admitting that heroin is his only friend.)

At once a symbol of iron political will and hardcore Christian empathy, the steely Livingston rounds out Wild's trio of deceptive characters.

Because of her unflinching belief that junkies are people, too, Livingston is perhaps the movie's most impressive figure. Her only apparent interest is in seeing people treated fairly.

As a portrait of an urban crisis and its political fallout, Wild's film does a consistently sensitive job of humanizing all players.

While the sequences of junkies passed out, shooting up, getting busted serves the Wilson-Owen-Livingston argument that nobody deserves to live like this, *Fix* is no simple tract.

The fear of the local Chinese community that safe injection centres will only devalue the neighbourhood is given reasonable expression, and one of the movie's most sympathetic figures is a veteran Downtown Eastside beat cop — opposed to safe injection sites — who likens policing the area to "shovelling water."

In the civic election that followed the film's debut in Vancouver last fall, Philip Owen was replaced in the mayor's seat by the former provincial coroner Larry Campbell — interestingly, a supporter of Owen's harm-reduction scheme.

Last month, North America's first safe injection site was opened in Vancouver. It's possible none of this would have happened, at least not in the same way, without the help of Wild's film, which played for weeks last year at a cinema just minutes away from the very streets where junkies were dying. Wilson was cleaning up discarded needles and Owen was trying to convince people there was a better way.

If so, it's equally conceivable the movie would not have had this impact if it hadn't featured such stubbornly unpredictable humanity at its core.

Fix moves to the Carlton today after last night's Toronto premiere screening and community forum at the Varsity. Forums will be held after 7 p.m. and 7:40 p.m. screenings weekdays and weekend matinees to foster debate and discussion about drug use, harm reduction and the options for Toronto.

Central figures in *Fix* will join Toronto health professionals and outreach workers at each forum.



Dean Wilson, president of the Vancouver Area Network of Drug Users (VANDU), and then-mayor Philip Owen were unlikely allies in finding a solution to Vancouver's Downtown Eastside drug problem.

Bringing junkies to a cinema near you

Director Nettie Wild wants everyone to get Fix

BY KATRINA ONSTAD

Here is what it takes to conquer the X-Men: drug addiction and civic unrest. Canadian filmmakers have always struggled to get their films seen, and lately, the question of how has divided the industry between those who advocate quotas in the vein of CRTCCanCon regulations and those who believe big-budget mainstream marketing is the only way for indigenous product to compete with Hollywood (see — or, more likely, don't — the flop *Footloose* for evidence of how well that's working). While the debate rages on, a small documentary called *Fix: The Story of an Addicted City*, an intimate portrait of a social movement in Vancouver's drug-ravaged Downtown Eastside, has been quietly selling out cinemas across the country.

"In Kelowna, we out-boxed *X2: X-Men United*, and we've been held over in most of the cities where we've played," says Nettie Wild, the film's director, beaming. Wild is a first-class hustler, as most independent filmmakers have to be. She eschews publicists, leaving lengthy phone messages of her own, and chatters a mile a minute at our interview. Thursday night, Wild inaugurates *Fix*'s Toronto run, nearing the end of a year-long tour that's hit 30 cities and towns across Canada. "We're a bit of a travelling circus sideshow," she says.

Following each premiere, Wild hosts a forum with a panel of the movie's unlikely "stars": Dean Wilson, the face of VANDU, the Vancouver Area Network of Drug Users, and a heroin user; Anne Livingston, VANDU founder and Dean's sometime lover; and Philip Owen, Vancouver's former mayor. Against the backdrop of the drug epidemic that has seized the city's downtown east side for more than a decade, Wild documents the difficult love affair be-

"WE DIDN'T WANT FIX TO PLAY ONLY IN REP CINEMAS OR ON TV"

tween Wilson and Livingston — she's a straight Christian, he's a former IBM salesman and functioning heroin addict who never manages to quit — and Owen's trajectory from fuddy-duddy politico to advocate for safe-injection sites, a stance that helped him get ousted from his party and lose his office.

"We didn't want *Fix* to play only in rep cinemas or on TV. We wanted it side by side with big stuff," says Wild. "I make films for people to see."

NATIONAL POST

NATIONAL POST, WEDNESDAY, OCTOBER 15, 2003



LYLE STAFFORD / NATIONAL POST

Nettie Wild says catching someone shooting up in a Dumpster really shifted her understanding of drug abuse in her city.

People are dying by the hundreds in the city



WILD

Continued from Page B1

You wheedle your way into the hearts and minds of an extraordinary community like this one, you don't then go: 'Oh well, too bad, the Canadian distribution scene is tough, I'll let it play on TV once.' It's an unwritten social contract that something must happen with the film — people must see it."

Wild has done time in war zones — she made the Genie Award-winning documentary *A Place Called Chiapas* — but it was only when she had her car broken into that she realized the magnitude of the crisis in her own city. The thief took an armful of Beta tapes from her back seat, worthless to anyone but Wild. Frantic, she began her search of the area around Hastings, Vancouver's formerly

glorious downtown strip that's now a boarded-up, spray-painted living room for the city's users.

"I went around into the alley, which is Blood Alley," says Wild, a self-explanatory nickname. "I opened the lid of a Dumpster and I don't know who gave me the biggest heart attack — me or the guy who was shooting up in the Dumpster." In that moment, Wild recalls, everything shifted. Though she has lived in the city for years, and she'd heard about the city's escalating drug problem, she says: "It's different from where you understand something intellectually as opposed to really getting it. It took that guy's face, the look in his eyes, a snapshot of degradation, and I got it."

News images of Vancouver's beleaguered downtown — even in daylight, addicts appear so splayed and crippled-looking, the streets so filthy, that it looks like a bomb went off minutes ago — are such common media fodder over west that they've become almost meaningless. Indeed, many of the people Wild interviewed were sick of cameras being thrust in their faces. "I had one woman tell me, 'Journalists are assholes,' to which I responded, 'I'm not a journalist!'"

Wild and her crew gained trust by hanging around downtown for 18 months, capturing 350 hours

of footage. "There are all sorts of boring events and meetings, but I'm looking for those little 30-second glimmers where people break out of rhetoric. You know the Leonard Cohen line: 'The crack is how the light gets in?' We're looking for those moments when people stumble and humanity gets in."

The result is that Wild animates a cold, political issue. She lets her subjects talk, and in doing so, they become people, free of their statistical burden. It's not a heroic portrait, but it is often moving, and complicated. Indeed, Wild tells me that Wilson and Livingston are now the parents of an 11-month-old boy, and that Wilson is still using.

In the film's most harrowing scene, a woman asks a friend to inject her neck in an alley. The episode lasts four minutes in the film but took 24 to shoot. "We almost lost our sound recordist. Twenty minutes of watching somebody poke around trying to find a vein — it's tough," says Wild. "Then [the user] gets up and delivers the soliloquy of the movie."

Many of the addicts in the film are also activists, and their cause is this: Between 1990 and 2000, 1,200 people died in Vancouver from overdoses, a catastrophe by international standards. *Fix* shows a scruffy group of Downtown Eastside residents calmly entering City Hall, a coffin on their shoulders, confronting a panel of uncomfortable politicians, seeking action.

"Within the debate about addiction is the question: Do you em-

brace harm reduction and go to where people are and help them from there — needle exchanges and safe-injection sites? Or do you say: 'Abstinence first, and then help them,'" says Wild. "But for these people, their friends are dying. It's time to hurry it up."

Fix shows Owen — first cautious, then bold — backing a "four pillars" approach that suggests investigating the viability of safe-injection sites. For this, he was eventually ousted from his party only to watch the mayor-elect, Larry Campbell, from Owen's rival party, follow the four pillars platform to victory last November. By this time, *Fix* had played in Vancouver to overwhelming response.

"Were we responsible for changing the election outcome? Probably not, but there's a lasting legacy for the film that I'm proud of," says Wild. "We're part of the fabric."

Last month, Campbell oversaw the opening of Canada's first safe-injection site, a small non-descript storefront in downtown Vancouver where users can shoot up in a safe environment.

"We kept bugging the politicians: 'When is the site going to open, because we have to change the end of our movie!'" laughs Wild. Finally, she did have to change the final sequence.

"It has to be said that the life of the drug users on the east side is still wretched," says Wild. "Nothing is going to be solved by one little safe-injection site, but it's the sign of a community coming of age."

National Post
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The Gazette

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COURTESY OF CANADA WILD PRODUCTIONS

Nettie Wild has been travelling to cities across the country with her movie, holding forums after the screenings to stimulate debate and raise awareness about drugs and addiction.

Fix becomes part of the solution

A safe injection site for addicts that opened recently in Vancouver might not have come to be without this film

Just over a year ago, Nettie Wild's documentary *Fix: The Story of an Addicted City* had its Vancouver benefit premiere before a mixed crowd of political, high society and heroin junkies. It brought out the cops and ambulances, but raised \$140,000 to fund Wild and her film across the country to increase awareness of drugs and addiction. This week, she's in Montreal, with the end of the road sight.

"It's been 33 cities for this dog-and-my show," said the infectious, enthusiastic, award-winning veteran filmmaker and committed activist during a promotional hustle this week.

"We've been travelling with a heroin addict, a non-user Christian and new mother, their 11-month-old child, the inner conservative mayor of Vancouver, and a filmmaker. I've been savouring the moment when the lights come on after the movie and jaws drop when they see what kind of forum is set up onstage."

Not content to let the message of her movie carry the day, Wild has organized community forums in every town her *Rolling Thunder* revue has visited. Montreal is no exception. Though Wild herself is here for



JOHN GRIFFIN

screenings at Cinéma du Parc only until tomorrow, other members of the troupe will join local experts and advocates for discussions after most screenings through next Thursday when *Fix* makes one final call in Quebec City.

As her tour of duty winds down, Wild is exhausted, but exhilarated. *Fix* has galvanized discussion in places like Kelowna, where the community came out in multi-generational force to help turn the cinema back into "the village well" for after-screening discussions.

"Drugs fascinate and spook the hell out of everyone, right across the spectrum, and across the country," Wild says.

She should know. She spent two years filming her unlikely crusaders — charismatic junkie militant Dean Wilson, confrontational activist churchgoer and organizer Ann Livingston, and patrician Vancouver Mayor Philip

Owen — as they made unlikely allies in an uphill pursuit of the first North American safe injection site for drug users in Vancouver's desolate Downtown Eastside.

"Vancouver is in a helluva lot of trouble," the B.C. native warns. "Downtown Eastside is a terrible portrait of degradation, with the highest HIV rate in North America. I was in Mexico (shooting her last picture, the Genie-winning *A Place Called Chiapas*) and heard buzz about the situation there, but had no idea it was that bad until I came home."

"I have to be bitten by a story. That's what *Fix* shares with my other films. They are all about people who have been pushed to take control over their own lives. When I caught wind that people were trying to open a drug injection site in Eastside, I was hooked."

Wild started talking to people at street level and worked her way up to Vancouver's top politician. "I figured I had to talk to the mayor just to get the other side of the story." It transpired that Owen was a "live one, a hands-on small-town mayor with the world's biggest bandwagon, who had realized the only way to combat drug use was to deal with it realistically."

Wild let the cameras rip. After 350 hours of tape had been compressed into 96 minutes, she knew she had captured not only a burgeoning love story between Wilson and Livingston, but the conversion of Owen from poster child for the status quo into a hero for the disenfranchised — who was kicked out of his own party for his troubles.

The ultimate triumph for Wild and her "stars" — bigger than extended runs for *Fix* in Toronto and Vancouver, bigger than sold-out shows and great feedback — is the news, seven weeks ago, that Vancouver had finally opened its first safe injection site. It might not have happened without *Fix*.

"Art and politics come together," she beams. "The cinema becomes the village well and gives people the chance to speak about the unspeakable."

Wild wants you to raise your voice through next Thursday after screenings of *Fix: The Story of an Addicted City* at Cinéma du Parc.

Visit www.canadawildproductions.com for forum times and speakers' lists.

After eight cozy years of pre-opening night premiere cocktails and fin-

ger food at the prestigious Museum of Fine Arts, Cinéma expanded its horizons vertically Thursday night by moving its gala to the cavernous lobby of the Pepsi Forum.

The rationale for putting a few hundred family, friends and capitalists of industry into a building with a ceiling so high it disappeared into the stygian gloom could be explained in a single word: business. This singular festival devoted to screening French films with English subtitles was offered the opportunity by local distributor Christal Films to host the North American premiere of Isabelle Doval's romantic comedy *Rire et châtiment* (Laughter and Punishment) and look it.

In return, the festival had to move the opening into a bigger venue, the better to seat Christal's people. It seems founder Mady Teitelbaum's baby is growing up. Everyone had a good time anyway — cocktails and finger food conquer all — and it's back to the Musée for the duration of this classy event, which continues until Nov. 16.

Visit Cinéma's Web site at cinemaniafilmfestival.com

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Wild's ride with the mayor

Film-maker Nettie Wild found herself on Philip Owen's side of war on drugs

Katherine Monk



In the most professional sense, it was documentary duty that pushed film-maker Nettie Wild to interview Mayor Philip Owen. In the most honest and, in truth, cynical sense, it was the expectation that she could capture Owen on the Downtown Eastside as "Daffy Duck in Hell."

In the end, she captured something else entirely. She captured a love story, a public health saga and a political soap opera.

The germ of the story was simple — and played into Wild's documentary sensibilities. An award-winning film-maker who has spent time in remote corners of the world, documenting revolutionary movements in Mexico, in *A Place Called Chiapas*, and the Philippines, with *A Rustling of Leaves*, Wild noticed a small revolution brewing in her own backyard in the late 1990s and decided to pull a team together to chronicle its evolution.

The project became *FIX: The Story of an Addicted City*, recently named co-winner of the People's Choice Award at the Vancouver International Film Festival, and centrepiece of the Mayor's Farewell at a special (and sold-out) gala fund raiser at the Vogue Theatre tonight.

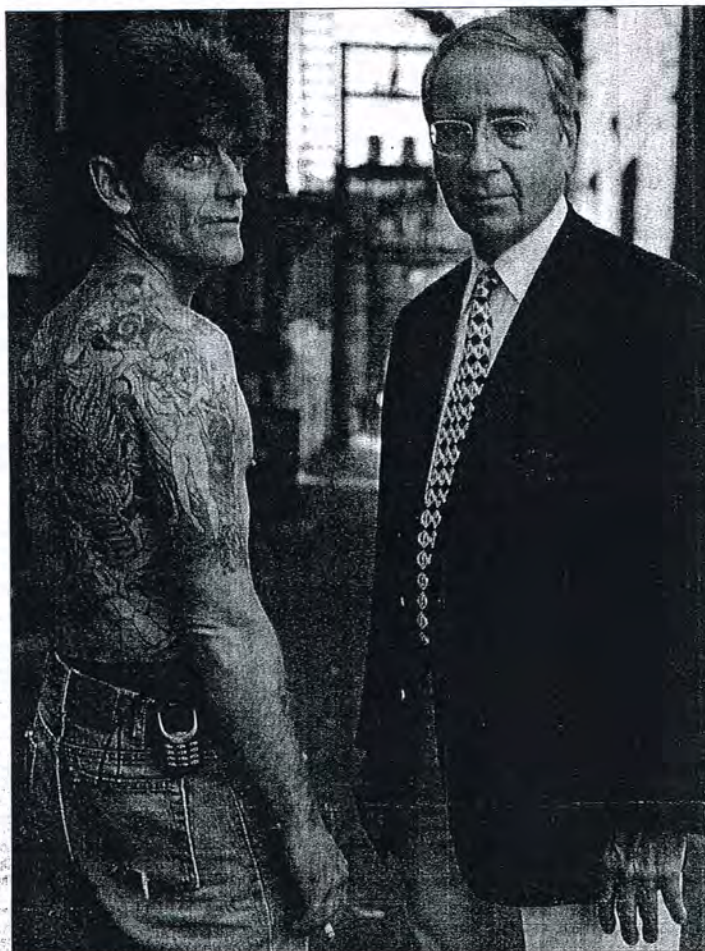
The film opens theatrically Friday at the Granville 7, marking the end of a two-year shoot that changed the lives of everyone involved, as well as the beginning of what Wild — as well as her subjects — hope to be a wholesale revision of the way society approaches issues of addiction.

Wild started her voyage — as she always does — on the street level, talking to those without a formal voice to hear the stories that haven't been told. She began with community activists and members of the Vancouver Area Network of Drug Users (VANDU), and slowly worked her way up the socio-political ladder to knock on the doors of Downtown Eastside leaseholders, land owners and, finally, Vancouver politicians.

"I figured that I had to talk to the mayor. I couldn't just wheedle my way into the lives of those people at VANDU, and in the community, and not talk to the other side. I had to get to the heart of the story. I had to talk to the mayor — but at first, it was really just a sense of duty that brought me to you," says Wild, looking at Owen across the buffed boardroom table that sits in the middle of the mayor's wood-paneled office.

Owen laughs. "I heard there was someone named Nettie Wild who wanted to interview me, and I thought to myself, that's nice — but I'm kind of busy," says Owen. "You see, that's what I was trying to get past," says Wild. "You have to get past the formalities in order to get the goods. I don't want polite interviews — there's hours and hours of polite interviews that never made it into the film. I wanted to get the mayor — outside of the safety zone."

Wild admits she walked into the project tainted by a lot of personal baggage about the mayor's conservatism. She figured he was a straight arrow without any real



Dean Wilson (left) and Vancouver Mayor Philip Owen from *Fix: The Story of an Addicted City*.

comprehension of the desperation downtown. As a result, when she finally got her chance to play 20 life or death questions with Owen, she asked him to do it at Drug Users' Ground Zero: the midst of the Downtown Eastside. "I thought, let's see if he'll go out into the streets ... but the minute we get down there, he knows the name of every person on the lease, the name of every business owner, the names of users — he even knows the street price of heroin and cocaine!" says Wild, her eyes wide with disbelief.

"I took one look at Kirk [Tougas, the director of photography], and he says to me, 'We've got a live one here.' We were suddenly running around, following the mayor through the streets of the Downtown Eastside, just burning through tape ... I mean, Phil — face it — you're a bit of a motermouth," says Wild.

Owen laughs. In fact, Owen laughs a lot throughout this two-hour meeting at city hall — especially when talk moves on to the subject of Jennifer Clarke, the alleged usurper who has been drawn as the Lady Macbeth in Owen's dramatic, and highly publicized, political fall.

Owen laughs, but he doesn't talk about Clarke by name.

He smiles and says simply: "They cut me off at the knees because they are afraid of change. But I think everyone in this city realizes the status quo is not going to solve the problem. It's time for action, and hopefully, this movie *FIX* will help educate people out there. That's why we have to get it out to the schools, that's why we need to raise this money.

We have a job to do, and we're not going to stop now," says Owen.

"The mayor is just too classy a guy to trash anyone. He won't even mention her name. But I have no problem talking about Jennifer Clarke," says Dean Wilson, one of the central personalities in *FIX*, and a VANDU organizer.

Wilson says he also had a lot of baggage about the mayor, but on the second day of filming, he began to see Owen in a different light.

"It's a scene that actually takes place at the beginning of the film. I'm in the van with other VANDU people and we're heading off to city hall to make a presentation," says Wilson, referring to the 2000 procession into council carrying a symbolic coffin representing the hundreds of drug-related deaths on the Downtown Eastside.

"While I was in the van, I was thinking of how we were going to make the most of the opportunity. I felt that if we were going to make this personal, we'd lose the focus, and that was people are dying down there. If we were going to do this, the mayor had to be on side," says Wilson.

Hoping the mayor would listen if he played by the "rules," Wilson said he would only ask for five minutes of council's time, after which he — and the rest of the protesters — would leave without further disturbance.

Wilson did stick to his word. The mayor did take notice.

"You see Dean outside there, in the movie, and he says there will no chaos. He stuck to the deal. I saw Dean a bit later at a police board meeting, and he said again, he'd speak for five minutes — and again, he did. He stuck to his

word. That's when I realized here's a serious guy — a guy I can work with. We respect each other's space, we aren't demeaning each other and we're both focused on making a positive change. We've built a bond of trust. In the end, that's all that matters, really, now isn't it? We want to stop people from dying," says Owen.

"Look, I didn't come to this conclusion off the bat. It took time to see there was no other way of dealing with the problem. I went to meetings around the world, and it soon became apparent that you can't legislate your way out of it, you can't incarcerate your way out of it, and you can't leave the status quo. The only way to begin solving the problem is to deal with it realistically, and that is the four-pillar approach that I've worked so hard to introduce," says Owen.

"This hasn't been easy for me, or for my family. But what are you going to do? So what if I've lost some of my social friends. Sure, I've been dropped off a few dinner party invitation lists since this all started. Oh yes, my wife has noticed. She knows. But so what? That's not going to stop me. It only makes me more determined than ever to make sure we don't start backsliding — which is, sadly, the direction that some of my colleagues want to take."

As the spectre of Clarke reappears at the boardroom table, Wilson — the tattooed drug user and former IBM computer salesman — gets back to his point.

"All of us have moved a lot in terms of the way we all see each other," says Wilson, who admits being a buddy of the mayor can

have ramifications in his social circle as well. Wilson believes Clarke has gone out of her way to steer the public away from embracing harm reduction.

Wild and Owen decide to steer the conversation in a different direction.

"I tried to get into the back door meetings, to see whose knife was in whose back," says Wild. "But they wouldn't let me in ... I wanted to get to the bottom of the conflict, and really, what I think this is all about is that by addressing the problem, you're outing the issue of drug addiction. This is about shame and keeping so-called dirty secrets in the closet," says Wild.

"Only by coming out of the closet can you solve the problem. We have to take the shame out of the equation and realize we're talking about lives. I mean, is there anyone in our community who is disposable? You hope not, but that's not the message you put out when you're busy trying to bury the truth."

Wild says she hopes the film becomes something of a "coming out ceremony" for the city itself, and a way to move past the fear and shame that comes with a serious addiction issue. She had no idea Owen would be right there by her side, and become the film's most significant champion. Yet, that's the exactly what happened when Wild told the mayor she needed cash to put the film in schools and theatres across the country because Telefilm — the government-funded agency that provides financial assistance to film-makers — wouldn't pay for the digital-to-film transfer because it was a documentary, not narrative fiction.

"It was a real slap in the face because every other film I've made has put money back into the system," says Wild. "But they said no and we needed \$100,000 to get the transfer. That's when the mayor stepped up to the table and donated his farewell party to the cause."

Thanks to Owen's support — as well as the support of community business, including The Vogue Theatre, *The Vancouver Sun* and Rocky Mountain Sound — the \$100-a-ticket *FIX* benefit tonight will raise in excess of \$100,000 which will go towards getting *FIX* into every high school in the country, not to mention every layer of government that deals with public health.

"At this point, it's very exciting and totally rewarding to see every level of the community step up to the table," says Wild. "It feels like it's the beginning of something quite revolutionary ... We can make a difference. This is a story about people trying to get control of their lives and a city trying to get control of its life. It can happen. I feel like this is the first step."

Owen takes a deep breath, looks out at the commanding view of the city before him. "I've talked to other mayors in the U.S. ... one even held up a hanky and said he surrenders — the war on drugs has been an absolute failure ... other cities are dealing with the same problem we're dealing with, and they're talking about decriminalization, about liberalization," he says.

"Look, this issue is not going away. It's getting worse. We have to act now. We have work to do, so let's get busy. I'm not going to stop. I'm not going anywhere. This is just the beginning."

FIX: The Story of an Addicted City's benefit screening tonight at the Vogue is sold out, but those eager to catch it before it airs on television can see it at the Granville 7, where it opens Friday.

Sum movie critic
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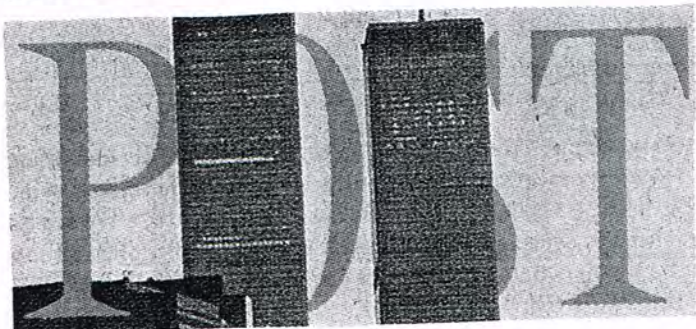


FIX: THE STORY OF AN ADDICTED CITY


(Nettie Wild) argues, with overwhelming conviction, the need for harm reduction policies for drug addicts in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside. It's an exemplary doc, passionate but balanced. Nettie Wild crafts the stories of her subjects, from addicts to politicians, into an intense, multi-layered narrative that plows unflinchingly into the complex heart of the issue. A troubled romance between the film's central figures — articulate addict and activist Dean Wilson and wryly impassioned advocate Ann Livingston — pulls the film together, but the people on the periphery of the story, like the woman whose nightmares force her to use drugs to stay awake, are just as compelling. This is an activist film that gives you something to do afterwards. The 7 and 7:40 pm screenings each day will be followed by community forums on harm reduction, attended by local health officials and central figures from the film. 96 min.

NNNN (Wendy Banks)

Opens Oct 17 at Carlton.



NATIONAL POST, TUESDAY, SEPTEMBER 10, 2002

**FIX: THE STORY OF AN
ADDICTED CITY**

FIX, a Perspective Canada film, plays today at 7 p.m. at the Cumberland and Thursday at 1:30 p.m. at the ROM.

Drug abuse is a problem in which the personal really does meet the political, as director Nettie Wild reveals in this emotionally charged and compelling documentary. The film focuses on Vancouver, where heroin addiction is a civic blight that has killed hundreds. Activists Dean Wilson and Ann Livingston want the city to declare a truce in its war on drugs and follow the European model of harm reduction.

For Wilson, a former IBM salesman and current heroin addict, this is a life and death battle. For Livingston, a straight arrow Christian activist, joining forces with Wilson and his fellow addicts is part of her duty toward the social outcasts. Wilson sees Livingston as a personal saviour, but she won't date him until he becomes clean. Their private lives mirror the larger ambivalence in society about drug abuse.

Although grass-roots activism convinces the mayor to adopt the harm reduction model, this new policy creates a backlash among respectable citizens. While some of the conservative activists are motivated by a cruel sense of superiority, many more are genuinely baffled by this intractable problem, just as Livingston and Wilson are in their personal struggles. ★★★ *Jeet Heer*

TORONTO INTERNATIONAL
FILM FESTIVAL

Doc Raises Tough Questions but No Quick Fix

MOVIES

Fix

Directed by Nettie Wild. Featuring Dean Wilson, Philip Owen, and Ann Livingston. Rating unavailable. Now playing at the Granville 7

• By **KEN EISNER**

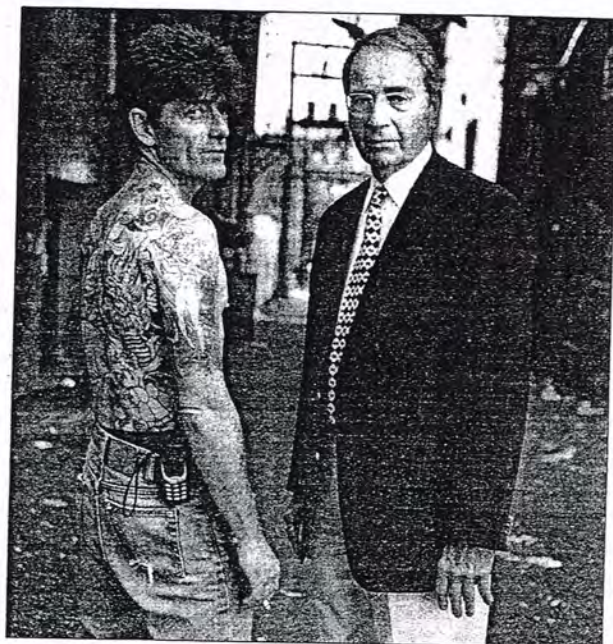
An exemplary documentary on several levels, *Fix: The Story of an Addicted City* tackles a subject—the battle to politically enfranchise some of Canada's most destitute and damaged citizens—that is beyond the purview of normal film-reviewing. Yet at the same time, the film is a perfect example, given its ongoing political influence, of how more can be accomplished through art than normal channels.

Vancouver Mayor Philip Owen comes across as a kind of holy fool in this smartly assembled feature from veteran Nettie Wild (*A Place Called Chiapas*), who singles out a few combatants in that monument to institutionalized stupidity called the War on Drugs. This might be war in its Downtown Eastside incarnation, but few moments in cinematic low comedy rival the moment when members of our fearless city council are asked to vote on a safe-injection-related motion the mayor has put forward and they look at each other like grade-schoolers asked to give up their lunch hour for a community project.

The principals here also include Dean Wilson—an impassioned, heavily tattooed, and fiercely self-involved spokesman for addicts' rights—and Ann Livingston, a Christian Samaritan and single mom who staunchly puts up with Wilson's unpredictable antics for reasons the film suggests but never quite makes clear.

On the other side of the struggle to provide safe places for addicts to shoot up are a number of Chinatown business types and city councillors who seem happy to sell out social inferiors to the whimsical interests of developers. How George Puil manages to survive the film without making a single incendiary statement is one of its greatest mysteries.

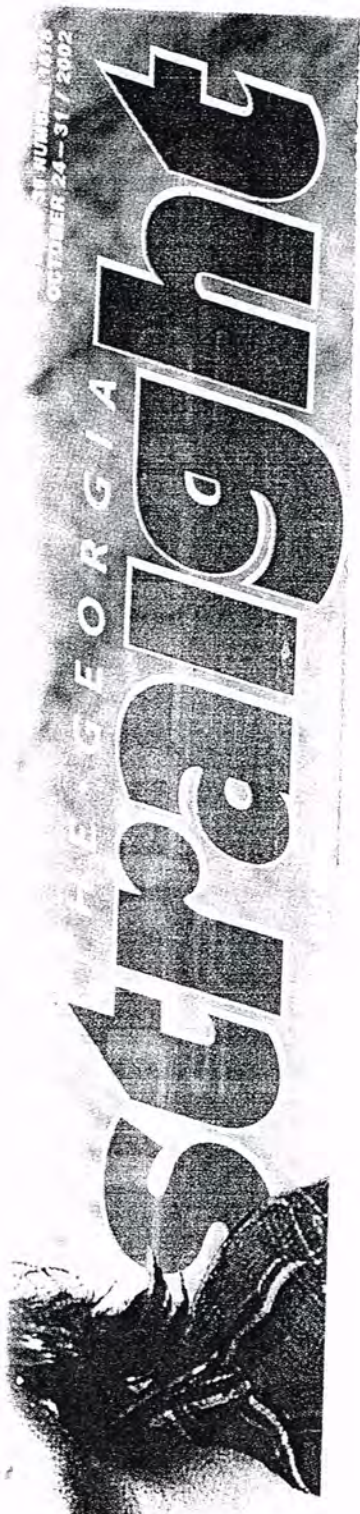
Apart from the inherent drama of its focus, *Fix* raises useful and hard-to-answer questions about the role of a filmmaker in such a quixotic journey, especially one that followed its principals so intimately over a two-year period. That Wild remains seemingly dispassionate in the face of issues that would make lesser beings want to put down their cameras and run—or maybe slug someone—is a testament to her



Mayor Philip Owen (here standing with fellow documentary subject Dean Wilson) wears the halo of a holy fool in *Fix: The Story of an Addicted City*.

dangerous and difficult.

Some of the film's subjects have been appearing at the Granville 7 for post-screening discussions. Livingston is scheduled to talk after the Friday (October 25) showings, and there will be visits next week from Owen and mayoral candidate Jennifer Clarke.



Wild sets out to *FIX* addicted city

BY JASON MCBRIDE

DOCUMENTARIAN Nettie Wild's stunning and varied career has included films on the Zapatistas and the Philippine Revolution, but she has found the most shocking and complex story in her own backyard. The East Side of Vancouver is the poorest postal code in all of Canada, its alleys and streets clogged with the most desperate of drug addicts, and the city's politicians and law enforcement are at a complete loss. In *FIX: the story of an addicted city*, Wild takes us deep into the heart of the problem, accompanying two of the city's most committed advocates for safe drug use: Dean Wilson, a charming former IBM salesman, himself an addict, and Ann Livingston, the good-as-gold, confrontational-as-hell organizer of the Vancouver Area Network of Drug Users.

The drug problem was a subject that Wild – like many Vancouverites – was aware of for years, but had avoided because it was just “too black.” But, Wild says, Dean and Ann were also representative of “her favourite subject: people trying to gain control of their own lives.”

The couple, whose on-again, off-again relationship is constantly jeopardized by Wilson's addictions, manages to enlist conservative Mayor Philip Owen, who is surprisingly willing to risk political suicide in their plan to set up a German-style safe injection centre. But Wild gives those who are against the centre, notably Chinatown



Director Nettie Wild

businessmen and an angry local architect, plenty of screentime to air their objections.

Wild thinks safe injection centres are only part of a much larger, and necessary, harm-reduction plan that involves prevention, treatment, drug maintenance and practical policing. “If you only deal with three legs of the table, the table will fall over. You need harm reduction – which is realistic, not moralistic – about how you deal with a person who is out of his or her mind on drugs. You don't come up to the person who's sliding down the walls in an alley and say to them, ‘If you promise to get off

drugs this minute, then all these services are available to you.’ What you do is you say: ‘How do we keep this person alive tonight?’”

Wild follows Dean and Ann's two-year struggle with unflinching compassion and fierce intelligence, and the harrowing, squirm-inducing portrait she draws should be required viewing for anyone concerned with human rights in this country. Wild, a feisty and committed activist, has insured that post-Festival screenings across the country – Wild's own company will be distributing – will be augmented by community forums featuring key figures from the film. Ann and Dean will also be in attendance at the Festival screenings. “If you get people talking about the unspoken,” Wild says, “then the forums are the best kind of controversy.”

The filmmaker describes biking home one day from the East Side to her home in trendy Kitsilano; sailboats were gliding beneath the bridge, the mountains looked beautiful, and she thought, “Man, this city is completely and utterly schizoid, and we've got to start dealing with it. And Nettie, as a human being: you call yourself political and an artist, you better get cracking. It's bonking you over the head.” *FIX*, however, is very careful not to bonk the viewer over the head; it goes right for the heart.

FIX: THE STORY OF AN ADDICTED CITY

Sept. 10th, 7:00 pm, Cumberland 3
Sept. 12th, 1:30 pm, ROM

PHOTO BY: ALEXA VACHON

Timely Fix clear and compelling

★★★★

Fix: The Story of an Addicted City
At Granville Seven

Reviewed by Gudrun Will

GIVEN THE MACHIAVELLIAN nature of the civic election campaign, the title of Vancouver documentary Nettie Wild's latest work doesn't sound hyperbolic. After all, "Invisible Mayor" Philip Owen's seven-year leadership will be ending as a result of his involvement in the Downtown Eastside drug debacle. Ironically, it's not the enormously high amount of crime committed by foraging heroin and crack addicts that has led to his departure from office. The reason is that Owen's NPA party members oppose his championing a progressive, European-style, harm-reduction approach to the drug problem, which includes contentious safe-injection sites.

The Shaughnessy-bred mayor should get some credit for waking up to the issue at all, and *Fix* is a fitting swan song to the career of a naive, sometimes well-meaning, politician. And he had better enjoy the positive publicity while it lasts, because a privileged businessman is unlikely to ever again look as beneficent. The documentary paints him as a guy comfortable with wandering skid row, compas-



Unlikely alliances; addict Dean Wilson and outgoing Mayor Philip Owen.

sionately encouraging junkies to reduce their intake. That is, without a doubt, far-fetched. Nevertheless, Owen had the insight to try viewing addicts as people who are sick rather than criminal, and that's where Wild and her crew peg him fairly.

Wild (*A Place Called Chiapas*) smartly takes what could have been a dry subject—the debate about how to solve addiction and its attendant social ills—and lays it out via a slate of colourful characters. Foremost among these is Dean Wilson, a tattooed former IBM salesman who can't quite kick his 30-year habit. In his lucid moments, he campaigns loudly for addicts' rights through VAN-*DU* (the Vancouver Area Network of Drug Users), trying to help save lives being lost to disease and overdoses, the result of shared needles and alleyway injections. During the film's two-year span, Wilson also pursues an unlikely romance

with Ann Livingston, a non-user and co-activist who shares his beliefs, and is held in the ravaged neighbourhood by Christian values and a zealous passion for the cause.

Through this freakish couple—who spend half the time being brutally honest with each other and the other half in a tizzy of righteous togetherness (since the film was made, Livingston has become pregnant by him)—we get an active slice of life from Hastings and Main, plus an engaging discussion of some of the area's key issues. Viewers meet Gastown and Chinatown citizen groups opposed to the mayor's plans, and glimpse the gallery of local addicts trying to organize on their own turf and protesting at city hall. A priceless scene of council members voting is almost worth the admission.

The film doesn't shy away from grimness either, with closeups of an addict making clumsy attempts with a nee-

dle to find a neck vein, and another addict so physically broken down that she "dances the funky chicken." Wild takes pains to give even these subjects a voice, reminding us that these examples of living decrepitude are human. If anything, the filmmaker is a little too sympathetic to addicts. We are left wondering where Wilson gets the money for his dope, and why Livingston chooses to expose her pre-teen sons to his habits and chain-smoking.

Timely as hell, *Fix* tells a clear and compelling story that will help draw public attention to a part of town most people, and most politicians, have ignored for too long. It exposes the magnitude and current hopelessness of Vancouver's problem, which has progressed from a mere specimen of port-city seediness into an international embarrassment. At the very least, it should influence the next civic government to seriously consider alternatives to the head-in-the-sand or war-on-drugs mentalities that have so far served no purpose.

★★★

Following each screening, experts and public figures lead discussions with the audience on the drug debate. Speakers this week include Mark Townsend of the Portland Hotel Society, Mayor Philip Owen, Coun. Jennifer Clarke and Vancouver street nurses.

24 EYE FILM OCTOBER 16/03

Drug war cowboys

BY PAUL ISAACS

FIX: THE STORY OF AN ADDICTED CITY ★★★★★

Directed by Nettie Wild. (114A) 93 min. Oct 16 at 7:30pm at the Varsity; Vancouver mayor Larry Campbell will attend. Opens Oct 17 at the Carlton.

Vancouver has a drug problem like the Vatican has a Pope problem. The main port supply of Asian heroin in North America, Vancouver has suffered over 2,000 drug-overdose deaths in the past decade. Of the 3,000 addicts who currently haunt the Downtown Eastside, 30 per cent are said to be HIV-positive, while 85 to 90 per cent have hepatitis C.

Things are beginning to change, however, and this September the city opened its first safe-injection site. The struggle to get that site built represents just one narrative strand of Nettie Wild's terrific documentary, *Fix: The Story of an Addicted City*. Forget the unwieldy title and worthy subject matter, this is a breathless piece of reportage, like a vintage *New Yorker* feature put to film: expansive, comic, digressive and ever so slightly demented.

Fix is structured like a classic three-act play, with action and character propelling the narrative. "It's like this incredibly complicated political drama," says Wild, a Vancouver native, in a recent interview in Toronto. "So you need a clear narrative with a beginning, middle and end. Otherwise the audience is lost."

The films opens on Dean Wilson, an articulate heroin user with Dee Dee Ramone's looks and Nick Nolte's screen presence. Wilson used to be an IBM salesman until his co-workers saw the tattoos and track marks on his arms. A perpetual quitter, at one point Wild films Wilson shooting smack just to get through his methadone withdrawal — a classic example of addict logic.

Then there's Ann Livingston, the president of the Vancouver Area Network of Drug Users. She's an avid church-goer, a non-user and confrontational as hell. She also might just be involved with Wilson, a fact *Fix* never makes explicit. (In fact, the two have had a kid together since filming ended).

Livingston is introduced while driving a truck full of addicts dressed as skeletons to a city council meeting,

which is where we meet the film's other protagonist, (now ex-) Vancouver mayor Philip Owen. Unlike Livingston and Wilson, the grey-haired Owen is a total straight-edge: we initially see him showing off his expensive Mercedes, then dancing the funky chicken at a black-tie function, a picture of the world's most embarrassing dad.

In the end though, the film is as much about Livingston's attempt to open a safe-injection site, and Wilson's attempt to kick the habit, as it is the story of the deeply conservative Owen's own rebellion. Surprisingly, this starchy mayor turns out to be Livingston's biggest supporter.

"The first time I met Philip, I thought he was kind of square," Wild says. "But then I got really surprised. First [time] we filmed him, he said we should go to the Downtown Eastside. He knew the street prices of heroin and crack, he knew the users in the alleys. They were all yelling, 'Hey Phil!' We discovered this complicated human being."

"In fact, I was really lucky with all the main characters, Livingston and Wilson too. They're all very intense, bigger than life. You couldn't make



Dean Wilson, former IBM salesman and drug addict

them up."

Eventually, Owen was kicked out of his own political party for supporting injection sites and drug reforms. In a generous move (and ironic fuck-you to his old colleagues), he used the \$140,000 in funds raised at his farewell bash to pay for *Fix*'s 35mm blow-up and cross-country tour.

Owen, Wilson and Livingston have even trekked the length of Canada with Wild to talk in special posting forums. "We're like the weirdest travelling roadshow ever," she says. "It's strange. Philip's wife always thought he was nuts for letting us near him."

Email letters@eye.net.



COURTESY OF NETTIE WILD

Nettie Wild's unsparing eye captures the devastation of drugs in his documentary.

Urban decay

DOCUMENTARY SET IN VANCOUVER

Nettie Wild tells compelling story of three people trying to do something about drugs and addiction

FIX: The Story of an Addicted City ★★★★

Playing at: Cinéma du Parc.
Parents' guide: language, drug use, shocking images.

JOHN GRIFFIN
GAZETTE FILM CRITIC

Nettie Wild's *FIX: The Story of an Addicted City* is not just nominally a film about drug addicts and addiction set in Vancouver's devastated Downtown Eastside.

The new documentary by one of the country's greatest and most respected political filmmakers is an in-your-face, up-your-nose showdown with the causes and effects, the victims and perpetrators of the world's largest underground economy. Junkies shoot junk, crack-heads smoke crack and lives are wasted before the unsparing eye of Wild and crew during a two-year production in the very heart of urban darkness.

But *Fix* is more than a staring-down of the dope cancer that is devouring the cities, towns and culture of Canada and virtually every other country on Earth. It is also an irresistibly compelling drama about three extraordinarily unlikely individuals drawn together in their

desire to do something about drug use in Vancouver. And Wild was there to film them.

Dean Wilson is a big-haired, tattooed showman and drug addict who, as president of the Vancouver Area Network of Drug Users (VANDU) is a charismatic spokesperson for street addicts from the impoverished Downtown Eastside, site of the highest HIV rate in North America. Dean cuts a powerful street-level political figure, when he isn't messed up on heroin or methadone, or worse — neither.

Ann Livingston is the straight, devoutly Christian, impeccably organized, fiercely passionate and fearlessly confrontational organizer of VANDU. Together with a motley crew of street addicts she and Dean take their campaign to open North America's first safe injection site for drug users all the way to city hall.

There they meet Philip Owen, the wealthy, square, conservative mayor of all Vancouver sitting comfortably in his ninth year of office. What chance will they have of convincing him that the

presence of a safe local site for injection without threat of overdose or infection is a first step toward getting addicts off the streets and into treatment programs?

Just because the sites have been proven to save lives in 27 other cities around the world, why should Owen throw his bespoke-suited shoulder to their grimy wheel?

OK, OK. He does. It turns out he wants his legacy to be something called Harm Reduction, a four-pronged program that essentially realizes drug addiction exists and must honestly be confronted. So this odd trio go to work, and it is truly something to see.

Do just that as *FIX* begins its week-long run at Cinéma du Parc tonight. Afterward, participate in a nightly community forum in French and English about drugs and addiction, featuring members of the film and local experts and advocates.

FIX: The Story of an Addicted City begins tonight and continues until next Thursday in English, with French subtitles, at Cinéma du Parc. For nightly information on the list of participants and forum times, visit www.canada.wildproductions.com

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